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THE ROUND TABLE

GOING INTO THE SILENCE

Children are not taught to regard their study of the classics in quite the right light. Some are taught to regard it as a task, pure and simple, which in some mysterious way, beyond them to understand, will contribute to their future well-being. Some are taught to look on the literature class as one of relaxation, a place to yield oneself to the aesthetic influence of culture, where enjoyment is to be had of a peculiarly elevated sort. Here there is confusion between reading and study. Other children are taught to look on their literature class as an added means of information to contribute to their general intelligence. I advance the proposition that there should be no absorption of knowledge which does not have as an object more or less immediate some form of social expression or service.

I have an exercise which I think fosters and makes clear this ideal. I call it "going into the silence," applying to the classroom a well-known literary phrase. When we are studying a particularly difficult classic, Milton's *L'Allegro* or *Il Penseroso* for instance, and we have come to some hard passage, I say, "Come, let us work together upon this. Let everybody concentrate. Let everybody 'go into the silence.' Here is a forest; we must cut it down, tree by tree. Or, changing the figure, who is to be the investigator, the discoverer, who will shed light on these confusing problems?" I tell them that they compose a miniature world of civilization in which each one should seek to discover truth for the benefit of all.

This point of view takes with them, and it is surprising to see with what energy they strive to be the Marconi, the Amundsen, or the Dr. Schliemann of their small civilization group.

To show what bearing this has on creative reading, I will give an exercise in detail. Let us take the opening lines of *Il Penseroso*.

Hence, vain deluding Joys,
The brood of Folly without father bred.
How little you bested,
Or fill the fixed mind with all your toys.

I say to them, "Well, here is something that we will have to work on together. Who can illuminate these lines for us a little?" After a few

moments of silence, a hand goes up, and a pupil gives the opinion that, "Somebody is telling somebody else to get out, because it says 'Hence.'" This is encouraging. "Henry has got us started on a good line of thought," I say. "Henry has put the problem before us clearly. It has now become our task to find out who these 'somebodies' are."

For a moment or two the class again "goes into silence"; then someone brings forth the theory that the "brood of Folly" is being told to get out. We accept this tentatively. Good questions are always in order from the children, so I am glad to have someone ask whether "bested" is a participle or an ordinary verb form. The majority quickly dispose of its participial pretensions, but there is more of a difference of opinion as to its tense, which we leave unsettled, pending further investigation. However, I venture the opinion that it was a good idea to pay attention to the grammar of the thing, and that maybe some further inspection of grammatical relations would lead to some surprising discoveries. The faithful grammarian of the class then tells us of the appositive relation between "vain deluding Joys" and "brood of Folly." By this time the class has brightened up; yet a general curiosity is voiced by a girl who asks why the "vain deluding Joys" were to be driven away. And so on until the entire passage has been made clear.

Such an exercise is not much of a memory drill. It is too hard work to be very amusing. Its object seems to be to give information, rather than to get it. Nevertheless I believe that this kind of work is more educative than any other we can do in English. We are giving the pupils practice in relating knowledge, which is thought; we are promoting the attitude of investigation, which is studentship; we are training them in the habit of contributing to a general good, which is civic duty; we are instilling the idea of hard-won progress, which is the Joy of Life.

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